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INFORMATION AND INFORMATION SERVICE CENTERS

INFORMATION AND ITS COSTS

All of us utilize information in our lives. Librarians and information scientists value it most highly since their lives are spent in gathering, ordering, storing, and distributing it. A very few in these professions produce information, although all live by it. For all people, however, information is used to reduce the uncertainty of nature.[1]

Those in information professions often puzzle over the relatively small use (in their estimation) that the general public makes of their informational product. This concern may be somewhat alarmist. Most of us live in a data-rich society, even, it sometimes seems, in a data-saturated system, and many persons may be evolving immunity mechanisms to the overload. Still, many in the information professions are haunted by the suspicion that a data-rich environment may be a decision-poor environment.

Many librarians and information specialists are particularly concerned by the low use of informational services by those perceived as requiring this reinforcement of their environmental competence—the poor. These professions have given a good deal of discussion, with some implementation, to new modes of organization more responsive to this target group. As yet sufficient attention has not been paid to reducing the costs of information to the poor, although we have been developing concepts and a few operational examples.

In democratic theory, information has a central place in ensuring the optimum working of the system. Without information, the citizen's choice of issues, parties, candidates, and officers is inhibited, hedged and fitful. To achieve intelligent choice the U.S. political system makes great efforts to provide low-cost information to the citizen decision-maker. In an election year, the U.S. echoes

with relatively low-cost information produced by hopeful presidential candidates.

In capitalist theory information also has a central place in the ideal operation of the economic system. Each economic man makes his choice assisted by information which is preferably low in cost. Like the democratic political system, this economic system strives to furnish the most information at the least cost to the consumer.

Not all citizens obtain the same low-cost data in these areas, nor do all citizens find it available although a range of information institutions sponsored by society exist to perform the task. Some are purely public corporations; others are semi-public, assisted by forms of governmental subvention to guarantee their effective role. Public libraries, municipal information service centers, and community action centers are perhaps the purest examples of public corporations providing information; radio and television networks are quasi-public information agencies. Newspapers, periodicals and the press are not public agencies, but represent an information interest of such worth that various overt and subvert public subsidies strengthen their disseminating functions. All of these agencies through governmental assistance endeavor to eliminate transferable costs to their clients. For example, one meaning of the word "free" in the title free public library indicates that the institution does not (or rarely) transfer costs to the immediate user. Transferable costs are similarly nonexistent for radio and television usage, although there can be substantial capital and maintenance costs. Newspapers and periodicals have maintained low transferable charges through the revenues from advertising (a valuable source of information) and from, until recently, favorable postage rates.

One must resist describing these modes of dissemination as "free," even for the public library which seldom imposes significant user charges. The costs of information cannot be reduced to zero, even for public library patrons. In making preferential choices of informational sources most of us opt for word-of-mouth from within our own work or social circle.[2] For some purposes, a high value is placed on this mode. A ready response is possible; the informant's veracity can be estimated; and most of the source's biases are known. But even here are some residual costs, largely psychological, expressed in deference and the pecking order.

Beyond word-of-mouth, the cost of information increases and availability decreases. Radio and television require viewing at a programmed time, and to get specific information on demand from them is nearly impossible. Visiting a public library or information service center requires a knowledge of the existence and availability of these agencies and the kinds of expectations one can place on them.

Some librarians have argued that their agencies are not particularly well suited for conveying information to the poor. The costs of

such information may, in this perception, be too dear for the economically disadvantaged. The poor may see the following costs as too dear: the site may be too distant, the hours inconvenient, the setting too busily official, acquisition of information too involved, and the materials obtained not sufficiently informative. All of these possible shortcomings indicate questions librarians and information specialists should examine and seek solutions to where required.

There is another cost element which cannot be overlooked if we wish for economical operations. Educational professionals, as mentioned above, are apt to place a high value on information. They are employed in an information processing industry and as a middle class dominant group, they perceive information as supportive of their life chances, although the latter may be somewhat illusory or open to question if one does not accept the pure model of a free choice democracy. The poor, too, live with expectations that are a fairly accurate estimate of their life chances. For the poor, information may have a very low putative value for obtaining certainty if it is unaccompanied by reinforcing structures. Institutional and social factors can, for the poor, sharply discount the effectiveness of information as a benefit-obtaining component.

There is certainly some doubt as to the value of information by itself leading to environmental competence, unless within any conceptual design for library information centers delivery systems are incorporated that place at least the most disadvantaged of the poor in a position directly related to needed benefits.

The design of a model that would institutionally unite information and its benefits could inflict a psychological wrench on the present clientele of libraries, upon libraries' staffs, and upon the libraries' very institutional foundations. Many libraries could not sustain such a service re-orientation. This direction I will describe as an information system that is integrated into a structure of client advocacy support. It is assumed that to achieve this would require an abandonment of the "universalism" of public libraries, for it would not be possible for them to claim that "We serve everybody equally." Instead libraries would advance the argument that they had substituted equity for equality.

Advocacy support can be illustrated by the following example. A client of a neighborhood library information center needs information on the availability of narcotic treatment services for her drug addicted daughter. The center locates the services, arranges beforehand for the receipt of the patient, obtains a car, gets the client and her daughter to the clinic, and makes certain that the daughter is securely placed in the in-take process. Brief reflection will show the distance the library now stands from the described activity. The above example is an actual description of what one neighborhood library—a storefront library—regards as its proper conduct, given

the setting in which it exists. An advocacy information service then should be built into a thrust-through system that will actualize its potentialities.

PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE PROGRAMS FOR THE DISADVANTAGED

A minority of public libraries throughout the country conduct programs designed to assist poor people, and a substantial proportion of relatively small agencies do participate in them. In an American Library Association study, a third of the respondents reported some kind of planned activity.[3] Thirty-seven percent of the smallest category reported on (15,000-24,999 population served) conduct some kind of program. At the upper range of population size (over 500,000), only 1 percent report no participation. Given the customary meager resources of the smaller agencies, program participation is at least a statement of commitment.

Federal funds, assisted by non-local funds, are almost overwhelmingly the principal financial source through which programs are established and maintained. Approximately 80 percent comes from outside sources with the local agency accounting, generally through expenditures in kind, for 20 percent. The Library Services and Construction Act was estimated to account for a third of the non-local dollars devoted to public library projects, and this figure may be higher.

Probably one of the principal benefits to be accounted to the library's programs for the economically disadvantaged is the employment of residents of deprived neighborhoods for work in the program and the employment of members of the Neighborhood Youth Corps. On the other hand, a disquieting characteristic of programs reported is the small number of professionally educated librarians who have been assigned to the projects: "Of the personnel added to libraries to carry out service to the disadvantaged, the largest number are the indigenous personnel, the smallest, professional librarians. Only in libraries serving over 100,000 people are any significant numbers of staff members added to provide service to the disadvantaged."[4] Neither the American Library Association study nor any other source has identified current programs in neighborhood information services. Their numbers cannot be large, yet there are objective conditions which could possibly support the establishment or expansion of these services.

LITERACY AND THE DISADVANTAGED

Poor people seek and can utilize printed information; low levels of income and education do not preclude reading. Nearly 10 percent

of persons with less than an elementary education were considered readers by Martin in a Baltimore survey. Respondents with incomes from $4,000-$7,000 were the largest share of all readers, being 42 percent of all readers. Persons with less than $4,000 income represented 14 percent of all readers. A high proportion, 63 percent, of adults with less than high school education regularly read some type of magazine. A heavy concentration of interest was reported on these categories: news commentary; home, garden, craft; and women's fashions.[5]

Library use, too, responds to education. In neighborhoods studied, even low educational level does not remove library use. Ten percent of all adults with an eighth-grade education and nearly 30 percent of adults with a twelfth-grade education had visited the library sometime within the previous year.[6]

INFORMATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL COMPETENCE

The most recently established sources of information for economically deprived neighborhoods are the local community action programs. At the level of assertion, it can be said that the Office of Economic Opportunity (O.E.O.), antipoverty agencies, and public libraries have not established good communications. Antipoverty agencies feel themselves to be a central source of neighborhood information. Today to operate such a service requires a considerable allocation of resources and the creation, probably, of a corps of information specialists and aides. It could be argued that information needs could be continued to be met by the O.E.O. programs without library involvement.

Even with the present benefit of informational activities by such antipoverty agencies, significant unmet needs exist in economically deprived neighborhoods. In 1965 the Greenleigh Associates found a substantial proportion of members of Detroit low-income households ignorant of important environmental information.[7]

TABLE 1

1965 SURVEY OF SELECTED LOW-INCOME NEIGHBORHOODS AS TO THEIR AWARENESS OF INFORMATION AVAILABILITY

Problem	Percentage unaware of service
Physical health	20.9
Mental health	39.1
Family problems	48.1
Employment	55.7

Table 1: Continued

Problem	Percentage unaware of service
Financial	47.0
Legal	43.5
Housing	45.5
Child welfare	51.7
Recreation	45.1
Day care	42.1

Library users (a self-selected group) are more fully informed than the general population of low-income neighborhoods.[8] By comparison, they show a more favorable awareness of information resources than non-users. A survey of low-income neighborhood library service in 1969 revealed these differences:

TABLE 2

1969 SURVEY OF SELECTED LOW-INCOME NEIGHBORHOODS AS TO THEIR AWARENESS OF INFORMATION AVAILABILITY

Problem	Percentage of library users unaware of service	Percentage of non-library users unaware of service
Child care	26	49
Household repairs	35	56
Medical information or help	15	26
Legal help	28	42
Birth control	31	51
Job information	16	40
Racial discrimination	39	68
Black/Spanish culture	30	68
Sports	47	46
Money matters	36	56

The data collected in 1969 for low-income neighborhoods show no significant difference in magnitude than that collected in 1965.

Admittedly, the latter have a more comprehensive base than the earlier. In any event, the data reflect substantial continuing ignorance of information resources to which citizens have a right.

THE LIBRARY'S ROLE AND INFORMATION

Perceptions of the library's role are important to the effectiveness of its goal's attainment and to the proper utilization of the resources which the community allocates to it. Three-quarters of the non-users of public libraries in low-income neighborhoods in selected cities had heard of the library;[9] 21 percent had been there. Library users visit the library principally to study or get help with school work. Study assistance accounted for 31 percent of the children and 35 percent of the general library user's presence in the building. A large proportion of users and non-users affirm the statement that the library has programs to help people. Of the users 80 percent and of the non-users 71 percent supported this idea.

Direct instructional services seem the library's most important function to community agencies, officialdom, and the public library itself. This coincides with the perceptions of most library users. Community information and referral activities do not rank high in the library's priorities. Information services rank fourth out of the six (see Table 3) most important activities. Library boards ranked community information referral services as least important. Local community action agencies perceive the information referral activity of the library more valuable than do other groups, including the library itself. They give such activities third place in the list of six choices. This relatively high ranking is perhaps related to the fact that these agencies usually play an important role in receiving those referred by those performing a community information service.

TABLE 3

PREFERRED ROLE FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES: AS INDICATED BY FIVE AGENCIES

	All	Library	Library board	Anti-poverty agencies	School	
					Public	Private
Direct instructional services	37	29	45	37	32	35
Materials to other agencies	10	12	10	8	11	10

TABLE 3: CONTINUED

	All	Library	Library board	Anti-poverty agencies	School	
					Public	Private
Resources for self-education	18	18	15	18	21	6
Community information referral	12	14	5	16	8	10
Cultural enrichment	11	12	10	8	11	10
Motivation	12	15	15	13	17	23

Source: Behavior Science Corp. *A Study of Public Library Service to the Disadvantaged in Selected Cities,* 1970, p.2 (fig. 2).

Library staff members do not perceive a strong role for the agency as a community information center. Of seven potential roles, "information center" ranked seventh, and other choices included: traditional reference service (26 percent); direct instructional services (13 percent); resources for self-education (16 percent); cultural enrichment (8 percent); focus for social interaction (14 percent); information center (6 percent); and helping/outreach agency (12 percent).[10]

While it is not possible to say that any selected grouping represents firm evidence, neither is it possible to say that the public library exhibits a strong commitment to an information service center concept.

INFORMATION SERVICE CENTERS

Collecting and maintaining the kinds of information necessary to sustain the environmental competence of low-income neighborhood residents has proven a difficult task even for agencies created specifically with that as a mandated concern. Too, there is some doubt in this writer's mind that the creation of information available on demand can reduce the substantial areas of ignorance that persist among the poor or the costs of that information to them. Kahn considers the advantages of an advocacy role and community advisory and control relationship important factors in assisting viable information functions.[11] There are examples of these in the public library

institutional scene; Langston Hughes Library in Queens, New York City, is one example.

The task of creating an information service through public libraries could fill identified community needs in low-income neighborhoods. Initial costs in equipment, education, and experience will need to be reduced and a reallocation of resources and interest achieved. This is not an impossible task, although the current budgetary constraints that some major metropolitan public libraries are experiencing will demand a rethinking of service priorities. The danger is that the response will be less of the same instead of an opening of opportunity.

REFERENCES

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2. To a set of five questions designed to elicit the respondents' source of knowledge about community programs, respondents rated information received from "friends, neighbors, relatives, or family" in all cases as the most frequent source. Behavior Science Corporation Survey. *A Study of Public Library Service to the Disadvantaged in Selected Cities.* Claire Lipsman, principal investigator. Sponsored by U.S. Office of Education, p. 10.

3. American Library Association. *Library Service to the Disadvantaged.* Chicago, ALA, 1969, p. 6.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

5. Martin, Lowell A. *Baltimore Reaches Out* (Deiches Fund Study, no. 3). Baltimore, Enoch Pratt Free Library, 1967, p. 30.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

7. Kahn, Alfred J. *Neighborhood Information Centers.* New York, Columbia University School of Social Work, 1966, p. 61.

8. Behavior Science Corporation, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 11+.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

11. Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 73.